CHARLES CURTIS

THE FIRST FREEMASON TO SETTLE IN MANITOBA

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Compliments
of Wm Douglas

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Once again we turn back the page of history to the time the first Masonic Lodge was instituted in this Jurisdiction. In doing so I cannot refrain from repeating something I wrote over thirty years ago. "The spirit of the men who first opened up the Province of Manitoba to commerce is indicative of the men who brought into being the great metropolis of Winnipeg and our own Grand Lodge of Manitoba. Their vision is reflected in what we see all around us today. They saw more than a trading post at the fork of two muddy rivers."

You will recall that our contribution a year ago centred around William Coldwell, Secretary of the first Lodge instituted in Manitoba. Today you will learn something about another of our founding fathers—Charles Curtis—regarding whom let me quote: "Shall I tell you who he is, this key figure in the arch of our enterprise? That slender, dauntless, plodding modest figure. His is this one glory—he found the way."

The brethren of today should be thankful that the names of the Craftsmen who unfurled the banner of Freemasonry in this part of the continent have been preserved for posterity. True, the lapse of time has created difficulties and delays but the long search has been rewarding and we now have a fairly complete record of the "old originals."

For many years Charles Curtis was but the name of one of the signatories to the petition submitted to the Grand Lodge of Minnesota, praying for a Dispensation to open Northern Light Lodge in the Red River Settlement. Now we hail him as the first Master Mason to settle permanently in Manitoba. Another FIRST for our historical records.

As we have already remarked Charles Curtis was one of the original petitioners in 1864. In the course of my research I discovered that he had been employed in the construction of the military post at Pembina when Hatch's Battalion arrived there in 1863. From this circumstance, and in the absence of other information I previously concluded he had been brought with the troops as a civilian workman to assist in the construction of a Fort.

How wrong can we be when we rely upon conjecture! Subsequent research has disclosed the fact that he was already a permanent resident in Red River Settlement and had been for some time.

The date of his arrival here is one of the blank pages of our story but it must have been in or prior to the year 1859. We make this assertion from the fact that in the Register of St. James Anglican Church we find the 15th Marriage recorded therein was dated November 24, 1859, between Charles Curtis and Cecilia Inkster. The ceremony was conducted by Rev. W. H. Taylor, who, five years later, was one of the two petitioners participating in the first initiation to take place in Manitoba. To what extent the influence of the parishioner had upon the spiritual advisor we must leave to conjecture.

As I have already remarked little or nothing of the Masonic biography of the Charter Members of our pioneer Lodge had been known. We did know that three of the signatories were Masons at the time a Lodge was instituted at Pembina by the Craftsmen who were attached to the Military establishment there. The unanswered question over the years was, "from whence did these three brothers come and where did they receive the degrees of Craft Masonry? The three in question were: John C. Schultz, Charles Curtis, and Matthew Connor. The first named was the first Worshipful Master and we have discovered his Masonic record, but only recently. The latter named, Matthew Connor, I have recently traced as to his initiation in Ontario prior to coming West. Brother Connor did not remain in Red River Settlement but proceeded with a Missionary party to the North West Territory before the Dispensation arrived. After years of diligent search we now possess some details regarding all three.

With regard to the subject of our present discourse, Charles Curtis, he was initiated July 31st, 1855; Passed 14th September; Raised 12th October; in Collins Lodge, No. 215, meeting at Bryan, Ohio. He demitted from his Mother Lodge, 28th August, 1857. Between the latter date and the date of his wedding in 1859, in St. James Church, Manitoba, he had taken up permanent residence at Sturgeon Creek. (Different references give his address as Sturgeon Creek or Headingly. Both refer to one and the same residence.)

There is no doubt, in my opinion, that Charles Curtis was the first Master Mason to take up permanent residence in this Jurisdiction. I am sure you would not consider it presumptuous to suggest that we crown him father of Manitoba Masonry. I think the facts will justify the honor.

Charles Curtis was a blacksmith by trade and he carried on his business at Sturgeon Creek until the summer of 1868. In *The Nor-Wester* of July 31st, 1868, we read:"Mr. Charles Curtis of Sturgeon Creek is about to remove his business to Portage la Prairie, he having sold his place to Mr. J. F. Grant."

Dealing with his Masonic activity we have mentioned the dates of his initiation, passing and raising and the location of his Mother Lodge. In the letter of petition to the Grand Lodge of Minnesota, seeking a Dispensation, dated 27th April, 1864, his is the third name on the list. At the inaugural meeting of Northern Light Lodge U.D., held 8th November, 1864, Brother Curtis was appointed Junior Deacon. In a small booklet written by W. Brother J. Hurssell and published in 1880, we read that at the election of officers held 23rd December, 1867, "Bro. Charles Curtis was re-elected to the office of Junior Deacon."

Some time, early in 1871, the brethren residing in and around Portage la Prairie, petitioned the Grand Lodge of Canada (in Ontario) for a Dispensation. This was issued, 18th April, 1871 (four months after Prince Rupert's Lodge No. 1 was instituted) and the first Master of Assiniboine Lodge was named Charles Curtis. Several informal meetings of the Charter Members were held and preliminary arrangements made but, Assiniboine Lodge, under that Dispensation, was never instituted. Reporting upon the matter the D.D.G.M. had this to say: "W. Brother Curtis, although being well posted in the American Ritual, never having had an opportunity of seeing the Canadian work, very properly considered it judicious that himself and his officers should make themselves familiar with our system before commencing." Assiniboine Lodge No. 7, Portage la Prairie, did not come into existence until 1878, at which time it was instituted by the Grand Lodge of Manitoba. Brother Curtis did not live to see his pioneer dream of a Lodge at Portage la Prairie become a reality. He died, suddenly, in August, 1874, at the age of 49.

We have already mentioned the fact that the military unit posted at Pembina, Dakota Territory, had been sent in pursuit of and to bring under control, a marauding band of Sioux Indians who had committed some dastardly outrages on the white settlers. Several of the Sioux tribe had entered Canadian territory and this created a rather delicate international situation. Folwell, the Minnesota historian, refers

to the matter of negotiations whereby an effort would be made to capture two chiefs, Little Six and Medicine Bottle, who had camped with their followers along the Assiniboine River, toward Poplar Point. This was during the winter of 1863-64. He reports that in the event of their capture, arrangements were to be made for their transport to the soil of the United States. The plan went according to schedule to a point but the Indians refused to surrender to the U.S. soldiers. Later that day the two chiefs were offered a free ride to Fort Garry. This was accepted and on their arrival there they were regaled with a good supper and a generous supply of toddy. Next day they went to Bannatyne's place and had a glorious spree. The liquid refreshment being generously spiked with laudanum. With hands and feet well tied they were then strapped to a dog sled and about noon the day following were cheerfully delivered to the Officer Commanding at Pembina.

It appears that by reason of being an American citizen Charles Curtis was hated by the Sioux band who had settled along the Portage Plains. Their dislike for him was further aggravated by their suspicion, not unfounded, that he had been largely responsible for the kidnapping of Little Six.

It required a stout heart and a strong will to take up residence at Portage la Prairie in 1868. The settlers were practically outside the pale of common law and protection to life and property was precarious, yet Curtis braved the dangers and brought his wife and small children; built his blacksmith's shop and set to work to beat out the ploughshare.

One of our early Manitoba historians tells part of the first run-in that Curtis had with Little Six. This occurred while still residing at Sturgeon Creek. The family lived in a large new house, with a good sized kitchen attached; this was the only portion that had been completed and in this, for the time being, the family resided.

One afternoon, during the absence of the man of the house, at Pembina, the door opened and Little Six with his warriors walked in. Mrs. Curtis was so taken by surprise and fear that she could not say anything, but sat down at the foot of the bed while the children gathered around her in terror. After accommodating his followers with seats, he (Little Six) sat down himself. He then asked for a basin and water. Mrs. Curtis pretended not to know what he said. Seeing this, the Indian Chief rose and helped himself.

He next requested a brush and comb, but receiving no answer from her, and seeing what he desired, went and took them, and arranged his toilet with care. This done, he spread his blanket on the floor, sat down and lit a long pipe, and, after taking a few whiffs, passed it around to his followers. The table cover next attracted the gentleman's attention, which he immediately desired Mrs. Curtis to give him. Mrs. Curtis shook her head as much as to say "no," which seemed to displease him, as he at once drew his knife and made a pantomimic gesture with it, as much as to say, "I'll cut your head off."

In this trying situation Mrs. Curtis did not know what to do. Her only hope was that some one would come along and relieve her out of this terrible difficulty. One of the windows looked out on a bay or meadow where the settlers made a large portion of their hay. Earnestly she looked to see some load or jumper coming along the trail. At length, as if in answer to the prayer of her heart, she espied a one-horse vehicle coming along. She jumped to the door, opened it, and, before the Indians had taken in the action, signalled the driver to come to the house, then returned inside and sat down. In a short time the door opened and a neighbor walked in. He had hardly time to take in the situation, when, with a dash through the door, which was now hardly big enough Little Six and his eight braves disappeared as mysteriously as they had come. Seeing the lonely position in which Mrs. Curtis was placed, he suggested the idea of acquainting her father, who lived some distance away and having her and the children removed to the paternal home, in the present excited state of the Settlement, until the return of her husband from Pembina. To this Mrs. Curtis gladly assented, and the change was made that same evening; her father only too glad to relieve her from their trying position.

In a few days Curtis returned and found the entire settlement in a state of excitement. Some scheme had to be planned in order to get rid of this band of Indian cut-throats, who were popping up here and there and everywhere. A meeting was held at which it was decided to offer them a dinner at Bannatyne's, drug them if possible, and get them out of the country to where their presence was specially desired.

The Indians were invited to a grand pow-wow at Andrew Bannatyne's place, where, as was their usual custom, they ate and drank freely. The liquor they partook, however,

was drugged, then the nine were firmly trussed and transported to Uncle Sam's Dominion.

The dislike on the part of the Sioux tribe, who had come to the Portage Plains, toward Curtis followed him to his new home at Portage la Prairie.

Let me describe one incident which will illustrate the experience of the pioneer families in our neighborhood back in the 1860's.

One day, one of the Sioux, Wolverine, whose notoriety consisted in being at the bottom of all the mischief, evil and theft, and who was in the truest sense of the term a "bad Indian," came rushing into the Curtis house, in a state of excitement. "Wanting to see boy; wanted to talk to him." Mrs. Curtis told Wolverine that he could not see him, "not in." But, Wolverine, not satisfied, made to open the door leading into the bedroom. Mrs. Curtis, placing her back against the door, told him he could not go in there. He then seized her by the arm and pulled her away several times, but she only resumed the position before Wolverine could open the door. At last, drawing his knife, he said, "me make you." Curtis who had been half asleep in the room, hearing the scuffle outside, opened the door, and taking in the situation, seized Wolverine, as an Englishman would say, by the seat of the pants and the scruff of the neck, and pitched him bodily out of doors. The description of Wolverine's apparel may not be strictly accurate, it may have been only a breech-clout, as Indians, in those days, did not always wear pants. Curtis, at all events got hold of something, at the extremity of the Indian's back, and used it with the above results. As the Indian fell on his face he dropped the knife, which Curtis had not seen before and which he at once picked up. Wolverine on regaining his feet, approached Curtis with out-stretched hand, desiring to shake and be friends, but Curtis with a light blow, knocked the hand to one side, and told him "be off out of this," which order was immediately complied with.

Still another experience of the Curtis family can be told. In the winter of 1868-69, flour was scarce in the Settlement and unobtainable, as also was meat. Potatoes could be obtained but at a high price. With a desire to help his brother-in-law and family in this trying situation, Mrs. Curtis' brother, then a young man, resided with them; he went to his own home, killed an animal he was raising, and brought the carcass to Portage.

The Indians coming to know of the meat, or probably seeing it brought to the Curtis home, nine of them came along the following day and demanded it from Curtis. His wife had just gone out to the garden to look after some vegetables, a few minutes before the arrival of the Indians, and apparently had not observed their approach. While thus engaged the children came running out to her saying: "Ma, come in; the Indians are going to kill Pa." Running in, she found her husband in the middle of the floor with his gun in his hand, while the Indians stood in the doorway in a defiant position.

Mrs. Curtis took in the situation at a glance, and knowing the dislike the Indians entertained toward her husband, she persuaded him to lay down his gun; then, standing between him and the Indians, she told them they could not have all the meat, but that they might have some of it; that if they continued this kind of work assistance would be had from Winnipeg, and they would be driven from Portage la Prairie, as they had been from Minnesota.

The Indians pretended to laugh her down, and make light of what she told them. Later, however, one backed slowly out; then another, and another, until all had gone. Even then she was afraid to close the door, in case they should resent it as an insult and return. Happily, no aftermath followed this harrowing experience.

Charles Curtis died on August 6th, 1874, at the age of 49. He had just returned from the Palestine (Gladstone) district, whither he had gone to secure a homestead and pre-emption. While there he had taken out logs for buildings and also put up hay for his cattle. Prior to this, in company with Charles Hay he completed a large bridge across Rat Creek, near the residence of Kenneth McKenzie Sr.

On the evening of his return, after paying his neighbors a visit, he desired Mrs. Curtis and the baby to sleep in another room as he felt unwell and did not wish to be disturbed. His wife, noticing that he acted strangely, determined after getting the child to sleep to watch him. Toward midnight, an Indian boy arrived on horseback with an order from his father. Curtis told the boy to put up the pony for the night, and asked Mrs. Curtis to make a shake-down for the lad. This done, he walked out on the verandah in front of the house followed by his wife, lit his pipe, took a few whiffs, and fell back on the grass. Mrs. Curtis ran to his

assistance; the last flutter of life was visible; a moment more and our Brother had passed from the seen to the unseen.

Being a devoted Freemason but miles removed from the nearest Lodge, the other Craftsmen then residing in Portage la Prairie, three in number, Charles Mair, Alexander Anderson and Charles House, took charge of the funeral arrangements and with solemn dignity conducted the Masonic rites at St. Mary's Cemetery. Here the remains rested until 1884 when they were taken up and re-interred in the West End Cemetery where a fine marble monument marks the last resting place of the first Freemason to settle in what is designated the Jurisdiction of Manitoba.

In the course of a recent search through the papers of the first Lieut. Governor for Manitoba, in the Provincial Archives, I discovered evidence that on August 6th, 1875, exactly one year, to the day, after the passing of Brother Curtis, his widow had another terrifying experience with the Sioux Indians. It appears that a group of the tribe approached the Curtis home searching for or chasing another so-called "bad Indian." The victim was overtaken in sight of the distracted woman and shot in his tracks. Not content with this dastardly deed the body was then stripped naked and rolled in a dirty, old blanket. The Indians then carried the body to the west of the town, dug a shallow hole and deposited the remains. The leader of the gang, the killer known as "The Doctor," was arrested along with his band, then examined and held in custody. While in detention they rushed the sheriff's deputy and made escape. The Doctor vanished from sight but after an absence of a year or more returned to his old haunts but the matter of the murder was allowed to drop and nothing ever came of the trial.

On January 21st, 1935, sixty years after the death of Charles Curtis, Assiniboine Lodge No. 7, Portage la Prairie, extended an invitation to Mrs. F. Browne, of Macdonald and Mrs. S. J. Garrioch, of Portage la Prairie, daughters of Charles Curtis, to be guests at a Masonic "At Home." The Lodge records tell us "they were pleased to do so and two very delightful old ladies graced the 'At Home' with their presence; a presentation being made to them in memory of their father."

And, in the Spring of this year, I received a letter from a grandson residing in Victoria, B.C., who had learned that I

was making enquiries about his grandfather, which in part reads: "My father never did become a Mason and mother was very anxious that us boys join. Three of us did which pleased her very much."

That, brethren, is the story of Charles Curtis, our first Freemason to take up permanent residence in the Province of Manitoba. As I told you at the outset, he arrived here in 1859 or earlier. The Masonic population at that time consisted of but this one isolated brother and it was not until the summer of 1863 that he could meet another resident in the capacity of Master Mason. Dr. J. C. Schultz travelled to St. Paul, Minnesota, that year and was Initiated in Ancient Landmark Lodge No. 5. Today, there are more than 50,000 Freemasons in the three Jurisdictions of Western Canada. They are indeed the Masonic descendents of our pioneer—Charles Curtis. Let us reverently pay tribute to a fearless trail-blazer, a worthy Brother of the Craft in whose honor we dedicate this record in the annals of the Grand Lodge of Manitoba.

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